

Sustainable Fashion

A Practical Guide to Safer, More Intentional Shopping

By MADEWORKS Intelligence

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Adapted from MADE SAFE Guide to Sustainable Fashion

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Executive Summary

The environmental and human impacts of clothing extend across the full textile life cycle, from fiber production and manufacturing through dyeing, finishing, transportation, use, and disposal. These processes can affect workers, human health, natural resources, and ecosystems, making sustainable fashion a complex issue that involves more than fiber choice alone. A more sustainable approach to clothing considers how much is purchased, how long garments remain in use, the materials and chemical treatments involved, manufacturing practices, and opportunities for reuse, repair, recycling, or other strategies that can help keep clothing out of landfills.^{1,2}

Purpose and Scope

This guide is intended to provide practical guidance for making more informed and sustainable clothing choices. It examines strategies for using existing clothing longer, purchasing more intentionally, evaluating textile fibers and chemical treatments, recognizing relevant third-party certifications, considering manufacturing and labor practices, and extending garment life through secondhand shopping, repair, care, rental, and reuse. Rather than defining a single “perfect” sustainable wardrobe, the guide provides a framework for considering the factors that can contribute to safer, more responsible fashion choices.

Rethink Your Relationship with Fashion

One of the easiest places to begin is with the clothing you already own. Producing new textiles requires raw materials, energy, water, land, chemicals, and transportation. Keeping garments in use longer, repairing them, and increasing reuse (e.g. donating unwanted clothing and shopping at thrift stores) can reduce the demand for new resources and lower some of the negative environmental impacts associated with textile production.

Before thinking about what to buy next, consider how you currently shop. Are you buying something as a reflection of your own personal style, or are you motivated by a trend? Do you know which clothes you reach for repeatedly and why?

Personal style does not require constant novelty. In fact, understanding what you actually wear on a regular basis can make it easier to resist impulse purchases and build a wardrobe that feels more personalized and unique over time.

Take inventory of your closet

Most wardrobes contain a combination of both favorite and forgotten items. Reviewing these patterns can help clarify how clothing is actually used. Rather than treating a closet cleanout simply as an exercise in getting rid of things, it can serve as an opportunity to evaluate garments according to function, condition, and usefulness. Some pieces may be kept if they suit your current lifestyle and are worn regularly, or if minor repairs or alterations may restore their usefulness. Others may be resold or donated if they remain wearable but are no longer needed. Or, if the garment has reached the end of its life cycle, it may be directed to appropriate textile-recovery or disposal channels.

Identifying recurring patterns in color, fabric, fit, and comfort also help reveal which types of garments to include on your shopping list. The objective is not necessarily to minimize the size of a wardrobe, but to better understand which items are actually in regular use.

Once you know what is working, look for what is missing. Maybe you keep wearing a shirt you dislike because it is the only one that works under a particular jacket, or you own plenty of statement pieces but not enough everyday basics. Identifying these gaps will result in a focused, mindful shopping list that is better for the environment and your wallet.

Don't forget the basics

Undergarments, socks, and other basics may not be the most exciting part of a wardrobe, but they are worn frequently and therefore replaced regularly. That makes them a great starting point for sustainable shopping.

Look for durable pieces made with quality materials and backed by trusted certifications when available. Replace worn basics when they truly reach the end of their life cycle, rather than replacing still useful items solely to create a “sustainable” wardrobe.

Understand What Your Clothes Are Made From

Fiber choice matters, but it is only one aspect of sustainable shopping. A garment's overall impact depends on much more than whether a fiber is natural or synthetic. Agricultural practices, raw-material sourcing, manufacturing chemistry, dyes and finishes, durability, garment construction, care requirements, and how long the item stays in use can all affect its environmental footprint.

Natural fibers

Cotton, linen, hemp, wool, silk, and alpaca are all derived from plant or animal sources. When purchasing new natural-fiber clothing, consider certified organic materials where possible,

particularly when organic fiber certification is paired with standards that address the manufacturing process.

Avoid assuming that “natural” automatically means harmless or sustainable. Natural fibers still require processing and may be dyed, blended with synthetics, or treated with additional chemicals.

Likewise, the fact that a fiber is capable of biodegrading under certain conditions does not mean a finished garment will completely disappear after disposal. Fiber blends, dyes, coatings, finishes, and disposal conditions can all affect the environmental fate.

Bamboo

Bamboo can be a rapidly renewable plant resource, but most textiles marketed as “bamboo” are not made from mechanically processed bamboo fiber. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requires textiles made by chemically converting bamboo cellulose into rayon or viscose to be specifically identified; for example, as “rayon made from bamboo.”⁶ The plant source alone does not tell you whether the finished textile was produced sustainably. When you see bamboo clothing, look beyond the marketing language and check for the actual fiber identification and any credible textile certification.

Fossil-based synthetic fibers

Polyester, nylon, acrylic, and many elastane fibers are manufactured polymers, most commonly derived from fossil-fuel feedstocks. These fibers can offer useful performance characteristics, including stretch, strength, and durability. However, synthetic textiles can also release plastic microfibers during manufacturing, wear, washing, and disposal.³ If synthetic garments are already in your wardrobe, wash them only when needed and consider a microfiber-catching device or washing-machine filter if possible.

When purchasing something new, consider whether a synthetic fiber is necessary for the garment’s function and whether an alternative, preferred fiber could meet the same need.

Regenerated cellulosic fibers

Rayon, viscose, modal, and lyocell are all regenerated cellulosic fibers made by processing plant-derived cellulose into textile fibers, but they should not be treated as interchangeable from a sustainability or chemical perspective. Conventional rayon is generally best avoided because of concerns associated with its manufacturing process. Viscose derived from either wood or bamboo may be a preferred option, but its safety profile depends heavily on the source material, processing chemistry, and manufacturing process. Modal and lyocell can also vary considerably by manufacturer. When selecting these fibers, look specifically

for Tencel-branded modal or lyocell, which is produced under more controlled sourcing and manufacturing systems.

Look Beyond the Fiber Label

The fiber listed on a clothing tag tells only part of the story. Textiles can also contain dyes, prints, coatings, waterproofing agents, softeners, adhesives, finishing chemicals, and other substances that may not be obvious from the product label.

Remember to be cautious with performance claims. Terms such as water-repellent, oil-repellent, stain-resistant, antimicrobial, antibacterial, wrinkle-resistant, and easy-care can indicate that additional finishing chemistry has been used. The specific chemistry varies, so a performance claim alone does not establish that a problematic substance is present. But it is a reason to look more closely.

PFAS

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) have historically been used in some textiles to provide water, oil, and stain repellency. PFAS are a large class of highly persistent chemicals.^{4,5} Because of their persistence and concerns associated with members of the class, avoiding intentionally added PFAS in everyday apparel is a meaningful way to reduce unnecessary exposure. Look for credible PFAS-free claims or certification rather than assuming that words like “eco,” “clean,” or “green” establish chemical safety.

Antimicrobial and antibacterial finishes

Some performance clothing, socks, underwear, and other textiles are marketed as antimicrobial or odor-resistant. These functions may be achieved using silver-based technologies or other antimicrobial substances. The exact treatment matters; a marketing claim does not provide enough information to determine which antimicrobial substances or treatments are used.

Look for Ethical and Transparent Brands

Sustainable fashion also includes consideration of the people involved in making clothing. Textile supply chains can involve farms, fiber producers, mills, dye houses, factories, and other facilities across multiple countries. Look for companies that provide clear information about how their products are made, including working conditions, worker health and safety, and policies addressing forced and child labor. Transparency is essential, and independent

standards or certifications help provide additional assurance that these practices are being followed.

The Fairtrade Textile Standard focuses specifically on textile supply chains and addresses areas such as wages, working conditions, worker health and safety, and safe chemical management. It can provide useful information about how workers and production practices are treated throughout textile manufacturing.⁹

B Corp Certification evaluates a company's broader social, environmental, and governance practices, including human rights, fair work, climate action, and environmental responsibility. Because it is a company-level certification, however, it does not necessarily mean that every garment sold by the company meets specific requirements for textile production.¹⁰

For animal-derived materials such as wool, silk, and alpaca, consider how and where the fibers are sourced. Look for companies that provide information about animal welfare practices and supply-chain traceability, as well as credible third-party standards where available.

Choose Quality and Longevity

When buying something new, look for clothing that is well made and likely to remain useful over time. Price does not always indicate quality, so consider the garment's fabric, stitching, overall construction, fit, and care needs.

It can also help to think about how often you are likely to wear the item and whether it works with clothing you already own. Choosing fewer pieces that you will wear regularly can be more valuable than buying several lower-cost items (such as fast fashion items) that are rarely worn. A garment that is worn for years may ultimately provide greater value than one that is inexpensive but rarely worn.

Secondhand shopping helps keep existing clothing in use and can reduce demand for newly produced garments and raw materials. It can also make higher-quality clothing more affordable and provide a lower-cost way to try different styles. Consider the garment's condition, fit, fiber content, and care needs before purchasing. When donating your own clothing, include only items that are suitable for reuse. Worn or damaged textiles should be directed to appropriate textile recycling or disposal programs when available rather than placed in donation streams that cannot use them.

For clothing that may only be worn occasionally, such as formalwear, costumes, or maternity clothing, borrowing or renting can be a practical alternative to buying something new. These options can help keep existing garments in use and reduce the need to purchase items that may only be worn once or a few times.

A note on dry-cleaning

Traditional dry-cleaning uses perchloroethylene (PCE or “perc”), a solvent associated with human health concerns.¹¹ When possible, consider a garment’s care requirements before purchasing and look for safer cleaning options. Choosing clothing that can be cleaned and maintained safely can also help extend its useful life.

Textile Certifications

Shopping more sustainably can take time and some learning, but independent, third-party certifications can be a helpful place to start. They can provide information that may not appear on a clothing label, including details about materials, chemical use, manufacturing, or working conditions. Because each certification evaluates different criteria, it is important to understand what a particular label actually covers.

MADE SAFE Certification

MADE SAFE Certification, a program of MADEWORKS, focuses on human health and ecosystem protection. Company reported materials are screened through the MADE Ecosystem Approach, which considers concerns such as human toxicity, bioaccumulation, persistence, aquatic and terrestrial toxicity, and potential contamination. For textiles, applicable processing and manufacturing requirements also incorporate standards such as GOTS.

Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS)

GOTS is a textile standard that addresses certified organic fiber content as well as chemical inputs, environmental practices, and social requirements during manufacturing. Under GOTS Version 8.0, products labeled “Organic” must contain at least 95% certified organic fibers, while products labeled “Made with (x%) organic materials” must contain at least 70%.⁷

OEKO-TEX STANDARD 100

OEKO-TEX STANDARD 100 tests finished textiles and their components for specified harmful substances. Requirements vary depending on how the product is used, with stricter limits for items intended for babies and young children or with greater skin contact. OEKO-TEX has multiple standards, so make sure to look for “OEKO-TEX 100” on labels, meaning the garment does not contain any of the substances they deem as harmful.⁸

Visit MADEWORKS.com website for certified apparel.

MADEWORKS Intelligence™ (formerly MadeSafe.org) has been driving marketplace change since 2015. We are building a bridge to a safer, more sustainable future for all. Using the Ecosystem Approach, MADEWORKS Intelligence generates insights that support better product development and advance systemic change. By bringing together science, industry leadership, and informed consumer choice, we help turn meaningful information into action, transforming the marketplace for a healthier world.

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